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SUBJECT: ANBAR GEO HOLDS PRE-ELECTION TOWN HALL MEETING

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¶1. (U) This is a PRT Anbar reporting cable.

¶2. (U) SUMMARY: Political leaders, candidates, and local notables attended a pre-election town hall meeting led by the Governorate Electoral Office (GEO) in Ramadi on December 4. The GEO called the meeting to discuss the rules and responsibilities of each entity during the campaign and on election day. GEO officials also described the security of the polling stations and ballot boxes. One indicator of Anbar's improved security: no one brought up concerns about insurgent-led violence. END SUMMARY.

Establishing the Rules

¶3. (U) Nearly a hundred political leaders, candidates and notables assembled on December 4 at the Anbar Government Center in Ramadi for a pre-elections town-hall meeting. Khalid Rajab, the director of the Anbar Governorate Electoral Office (GEO), led a two-hour discussion in which he and other GEO officials described the roles and responsibilities of the political entities, observers and party agents for the January 31 provincial elections.

¶4. (U) Khalid assured the assembly that the election will be transparent and that his office will not tolerate forgery and mud-slinging. He urged candidates to campaign with gusto. He also reminded them that the campaign will be governed by Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) rules: candidates will not be allowed to use government vehicles, mosques or schools for campaigning; all parties need to refrain from election violence and respect others' opinions in the campaign. Khalid added that any grievances should be adjudicated through the legal process.

Manning the polling stations

¶5. (U) Khalid described the responsibilities of the registered party agents, who will staff election centers and who will be authorized to register complaints. A committee comprised of IHEC lawyers would then adjudicate them. Two election observers trained under IHEC guidelines will man each ballot station. Although they cannot make official complaints, they will be able to bring discrepancies to the attention of poll workers and the media. According to Khalid, Iraqi police will provide security outside the polling centers, and a vehicle curfew will be imposed the day of the elections and the day before.

A Complex Ballot

¶6. (U) Other GEO officials reviewed the election's ballot form by projecting an illustration of one onto a screen, and discussed the complex procedure of counting ballots and awarding seats. According to the formula set by the Elections Law, Anbar's new Provincial Council will be

comprised of 29 seats, fewer than the current 48 seats. The complexity of the ballot caused some confusion among the attendees. Wrapping up that discussion, one GEO official described a voter education campaign of workshops aimed at women, youth, religious and tribal audiences.

Ballot Boxes and Warehouse Works

¶7. (SBU) A week prior to the conference, Khalid showed off to PRT and MNF-W staff the new operations center inside his Ramadi office. The center will be open on elections day to oversee the movement of ballot boxes and to coordinate any emergency response. It will be manned by the GEO director, a judge and liaisons to the Iraqi Army, Iraqi Police and CF's.

¶8. (SBU) Afterward, PRT and MNF-W staff toured the planned holding area for the ballot boxes at the GEO warehouse. Boxes are expected to arrive within two weeks of the election and will be transported by IHEC officials with an Iraqi Army Qand will be transported by IHEC officials with an Iraqi Army escort. Ballots will not return to the warehouse until votes have been counted and the results called into the GEO operations center. GEO officials will keep watch inside the warehouse. Iraqi police will secure the area around the warehouse but not inside.

Comment

¶9. (U) Three hundred and sixty thousand Anbaris participated in the voter registration update, a good proportion of total

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eligible voters. This figure alone is nearly 100 times the number of citizens who cast ballots in the boycotted 2005 national elections. Fifty-six political entities are registered. These indicators, along with the well-attended town-hall meeting, point to a broad public participation. One noteworthy fact: at the town-hall, no attendee raised a concern about election-related insurgent violence, which quietly underscores the progress made locally on the security front.

CROCKER